Green Berets' Image May Now Develop Black Eye

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The murder case involving the former commander of U.S. special forces and seven of his officers in Vietnam lends a potential black eye to the heretofore popular image of the stalwart "Green Berets."

The Green Berets, so-called because of the jaunty little headgear, became the glory boys early in the Vietnam war largely because they caught the fancy of the late President Kennedy.

The special forces troopers, possibly the most intensively trained of U.S. fighters, were envisioned by Kennedy as one means of coping with insurgencies in Communist-threatened countries.

Although the introduction of large combat forces in Vietnam have overshadowed them, the Green Berets still practice what some people view as their glamorous unconventional warfare—organizing guerrillas and harassing Viet Cong lines of communication and supply points.

But the Berets also have had a major assignment in advising Vietnamese district chiefs in defending the villages and helping refugees establish security as they resettle in Viet Cong-infested areas.

The special forces were among the first U.S. fighting men to go into Vietnam in late 1961 when Kennedy decided that more had to be done to shore up the weakening Saigon government against the Viet Cong.

Special forces there grew as the war intensified. At the end of 1962 there were only about 450 Green Berets in Vietnam. Currently there are about 3,000.

They work in small teams of a dozen or fewer men, the number varying with the scope of their mission. Originally they acted as advisers but soon were caught up in the fighting. Dozens have been killed.

Working with Vietnamese forces in remote border camps, the Green Berets have kept an eye toward Cambodia and Laos, interfering where possible with the incoming flow of Communist troops and supplies.

Supposedly the Green Berets don't go into North Vietnam to conduct clandestine behind the lines activity. But apparently they train South Vietnamese who do. On several occasions North Vietnam has reported capturing South Vietnamese within its territory.

Green Berets, military sources report, do operate in and out of Laos against infiltrating North Vietnamese troops.

Before going to Vietnam, the Green Berets learn more than mere hand-to-hand combat and how to survive in the jungle. They also are taught psychological warfare methods and receive some 100 hours instruction in the Vietnamese language.